

Palace Acquire attracts top college graduates

by Rob Bardua, Air Force Materiel Command Public Affairs

WRIGHT-PATTERSON AFB, OHIO (AFMC) ---The Palace Acquire, or PAQ, program has quickly become an attractive option for top college graduates searching for federal employment in a variety of career fields, according to Air Force personnel officials.

This is especially true for scientists and engineers, vital to the future health of Air Force Materiel Command, officials said.

"You can't beat this," said Anthony Spohn, who recently joined the Palace Acquire program, and now works as an engineer in the Aeronautical System Center Engineering Directorate here. "When I started looking at other jobs, I thought, 'it would have to be a really, really special job in order for me to take it over this PAQ job.'"

The science and engineering career field has developed a PAQ program specifically designed to attract college graduates in today's highly competitive labor market. Most science and engineering college graduates join the program as "interns" at the GS-7 level and receive a year of on-the-job training. The second year, the interns are promoted to GS-9 and attend one year of full-time graduate school, with their salary and tuition paid in full.

"We don't send interns to graduate school to get their master's degree," said Brian Ballew, Scientist and Engineer Career Program administrator. "If they receive their master's, that's good. However, all we require is they follow their academic plan and make satisfactory grades."

Following their year of graduate school, the interns are promoted to GS-11 and return to their original office for a final year of training. After the third year, the interns graduate from the PAQ program and are promoted to GS-12.

While the training program offers advancements through the GS system as well as graduate education, there are strings attached. The program requires a three-year commitment.

"One year of graduate school generates three years obligation, but the first year is concurrent with the last year of the program," said Ballew. "If a person leaves government employment, they must repay the tuition and books on a prorated basis."

Spohn, who plans to attend Ohio State or the Air Force Institute of Technology next fall to pursue a graduate degree in aerospace engineering, said he's impressed with this program.

"Other than the government, I've never seen a program like this anywhere," Spohn said. "Boeing, Lockheed, yeah, they'll reimburse you after you go to class, but they aren't going to pay your salary while you're gone."

"They aren't going to pay for your education and books while you are going to class," he said. "I don't have to spend any money out of pocket, and I get a salary. You don't get this anywhere else that I've seen."

The opportunities for education and training were especially important. According to Spohn, "it was the ultimate driver in my job seeking."

PAQ program benefits will be a huge help in attracting engineers in the future, according to Polly Sweet, AFMC's Human Resources Division director.

"In the past, the PAQ program has had some difficulty recruiting engineers," said Sweet. "Engineers are the most competitive and challenging to recruit because the market reflects a great demand for engineering talent. So the fact we are able to offer candidates the ability to go to graduate school, while still being paid a salary, seems to be an attractive benefit that will help us bring quality engineers into the command."

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The PAQ program's success will impact AFMC's success in the future, Sweet said.

"We are definitely counting on the PAQ program to help us bring in good people across the command," she said. "The program is certainly helpful to us in recruiting and retaining trainees across all of our covered career fields." And as more people find out about the PAQ program benefits, Sweet said, civilians, especially scientists and engineers, will realize that, "you can't beat this." @